

Citation for published version:

Marsh, R 2011, 'The "new political novel" by right-wing writers in post-Soviet Russia', *Forum für osteuropäische Ideen- und Zeitgeschichte*, vol. 14, no. 1, pp. 159-187.

Publication date:
2011

[Link to publication](#)

University of Bath

Alternative formats

If you require this document in an alternative format, please contact:
openaccess@bath.ac.uk

General rights

Copyright and moral rights for the publications made accessible in the public portal are retained by the authors and/or other copyright owners and it is a condition of accessing publications that users recognise and abide by the legal requirements associated with these rights.

Take down policy

If you believe that this document breaches copyright please contact us providing details, and we will remove access to the work immediately and investigate your claim.

III. Anti-Western Tendencies in Post-Soviet Russia and Their Historical Roots (1)

Rosalind Marsh

The “New Political Novel” by Right-Wing Writers in Post-Soviet Russia

Most Western commentators claim that literature and politics have moved irrevocably apart into two separate spheres in the post-Soviet period. However, I have argued in my recent book (Marsh 2007) that the end of the 1990s and the beginning of the new millennium witnessed the emergence of what I would term “the new political novel,” encompassing writers of many different political viewpoints – from Aleksandr Prokhanov’s national-patriotic and anarcho-communist attacks on governmental mechanisms of oppression to Aleksandr Tsvetkov’s hostility to global capitalist production and the power of the mass media. This suggests that Russian literature has once again become politicized, perhaps because writers living in Putin’s “managed democracy” feel that they are as remote from the levers of power as they were in the Soviet period.

This paper will focus specifically on fiction and political writings published in the late 1990s and early twenty-first century by right-wing authors of a “national-patriotic” persuasion. The first part will focus on the new rise to prominence in the twenty-first century of certain long-standing writers of right-wing political fiction such as Aleksandr Prokhanov (born 1938), the editor of the ultranationalist newspaper *Zavtra* (published since 1993, after his earlier newspaper *Den*’ was banned); and Eduard Limonov (born 1943), the notorious leader of the National Bolshevik Party, which since 2007 has been banned as an official party.

The second part will analyse a new type of nationalist fiction that emerged in the twenty-first century: the *imperskii roman* (“imperial novel”), created by younger writers such as Pavel Krusanov (a member of a group called the “New Petersburg Fundamentalists”), and the Moscow writer, critic and media personality Dmitrii Bykov, which advocates a strong state and imperial expansionism. Works by such nationalist writers attracted a wide readership and began to win literary prizes.

A study of Russian literature from the turn of the twenty-first century is a suitable means of exploring the expression and development of ultranationalist ideas in post-Soviet Russia (even though literature has become much less influential than in earlier periods of Russian history), because it is one medium (along with the Internet) where individual talents are able to thrive. Through fiction and socio-political writings in literary journals, writers can still express a diversity of views and counter the increasingly monolithic government-controlled media. Without revisiting the history of Russian nationalist writings in the Soviet and immediate post-Soviet periods, it is important to note that right-wing ideas did not spring up overnight in the 1990s, but had a history dating back – at the very least – to Stalin’s embrace of Russian nationalism and his concordat with the official Russian Orthodox Church immediately before and during the “Great Fatherland War” (Brandenberger 2002). From the “thaw” period onwards, an ideological battle has been waged in Russian literature and cultural criticism between “liberals” (or “democrats”) and “conservatives” (or “national-patriots”) (Marsh 1986, 1995; Ivanova 2007).

Right-wing literature and *publitsistika*, which had largely been driven underground in the USSR (with the exception of the “village prose” writers of the Brezhnev period), re-emerged during glasnost and even began to flourish, mainly in the three nationalist journals which survived the fall of the Soviet Union and have managed to retain a loyal (if dwindling) readership in the twenty-first century. Each of these journals has a different profile: generally speaking, *Nash sovremennik* supports radical Russian nationalism, *Molodaia gvardiia* endorses the communists and the military-industrial complex, while *Moskva* propagates Russian religious thought and the ideas of the *pochvenniki* (the native-soil conservatives of the nineteenth century). The texts published in these journals are not particularly well known in the West, perhaps because cultural studies scholars (including myself) have tended to concentrate on the more attractive “liberal,”

“democratic,” anti-Stalinist or pro-Western writings that flooded the literary journals during perestroika, and the experimental or “post-modernist” writings published in the early post-Soviet period.¹ Yet by the mid- to late 1990s, and especially since Yeltsin’s re-election campaign in 1996, followed by his ill-fated attempt to discover a new “idea for Russia” in 1996-7, the resurgence of Russian nationalism and neo-imperialism and the re-emergence of traditionalist religion have become too apparent and powerful to ignore, and have found reflection in new and diverse forms of literature.

The Resurgence of Ultranationalist Fiction

The ultranationalist writer Aleksandr Prokhanov, who has been publishing since 1971, maintains that all his fiction of the post-Soviet period essentially forms one book, and that his project of writing seven novels about the fall of the “Red Empire” is a sacred mission from God.² Prokhanov initially made his name as a foreign correspondent endorsing Soviet foreign policy, notably the war in Afghanistan, but since perestroika he has been a consistent supporter of the conservative opposition to both Soviet and post-Soviet leaders. In August 1991, Prokhanov supported the failed putsch of the State Emergency Committee against Gorbachev; he defended the White House against Yeltsin’s assault in 1993, and remained an implacable opponent of Yeltsin’s regime throughout the 1990s; and he subsequently came to oppose Putin (although initially, when he was invited to the Kremlin in August 2000, he was prepared to support him, and in the late 2000s his views appear to be changing again because of Putin’s increasingly anti-Western, imperialist policies). Prokhanov has always been a powerful and prolific writer with a not inconsiderable artistic talent, but his literary career, which was on the wane in the 1990s, experienced a meteoric rise in

¹ One of the few exceptions is Kathleen Parthé (1996; 2004), but she does not deal in detail with conservative and nationalist writings of the post-Soviet period. See Ivanova (2007) for an overview of right-wing literary criticism since the 1960s, which has sometimes, in the twenty-first century, reached shocking neo-fascist proportions.

² Interview with A. Prokhanov, *Literaturnaia gazeta*, 19-25 June 2002: 7.

2002, when he won the National Bestseller Prize for his national-patriotic novel *Gospodin Geksogen* (*Mr Hexogen*).

The content of Prokhanov's novel was sensational and highly topical, since it contained biting satires of many of Russia's leading politicians of the past decade, including Yeltsin (recognizable under the soubriquet "Istukan" ("The Idol," or "Dummy") and Putin ("Izbrannyy," or "The Chosen One"); the main villain is the Jewish oligarch Zaretsky, based on the media tycoon Boris Berezovsky who was granted political asylum in London in 2003. *Mr Hexogen* describes the major political events that took place in Russia from spring 1999 to the beginning of 2000. Many of the episodes depicted by Prokhanov do in fact correspond to the realities of Russian political life in this period, although he also includes some fictional events (or fascinating political speculations). Prokhanov is rumoured to be very well informed, since many readers of *Zavtra* send him information, and he is well connected with the security services. His novel is distinguished by extreme anti-Westernism, rabid anti-Semitism, and Stalinist nostalgia, along with a fascination for conspiracy theories and esoteric ideas and imagery reminiscent of the New Right theorist of contemporary Eurasianism, Aleksandr Dugin.³ In particular, Prokhanov's depiction of the long-standing rivalry between the two esoteric "orders" of the KGB and GRU (the military intelligence service) is indebted to Dugin's neo-fascist writings,⁴ although Dugin dates this conflict back to the immediate aftermath of the Bolshevik Revolution, while Prokhanov attributes it to the Stalin era (when Russian nationalism was revived to unite the country against Nazi Germany).

At the beginning of the novel, Russia is in disorder after the financial crisis of August 1998, and a secret society within the security services (later named as "the KGB Order"), decides to take over Russia and establish an

³ For further discussion of the anti-Western, anti-Semitic aspects of Prokhanov's novel, see Marsh 2007: 523-6, and for a detailed investigation of its esoteric elements, see Griffiths 2007. For a heated debate between Andreas Umland and A. James Gregor on the question of whether Dugin can be defined as a "fascist," see Griffin, Loh and Umland, 2006: 459-99; and for a translation of Dugin's work "Fascism – borderless and red," see *ibid.*: 505-10. Because of this unresolved (or unsolvable?) controversy, I have chosen to use the term "neo-fascist" or "ultranationalist" instead of "fascist."

⁴ Aleksandr Dugin, *The Great War of Continents*: 7-10, <http://www.bolsheviks.org/DOCUMENTS/THE%20GREAT%20WAR%20I.htm>. This text was originally

authoritarian regime. The Order devises “Plan Swahili,” according to which “Chosen One” (Putin) who initially appears as “a small man reminiscent of a chess piece” (Prokhanov, 2002: 76), will become President of Russia and the obedient puppet of the secret “KGB order.” The KGB-FSB, under the supervision of General Grechishnikov, probably based on the then Director of the FSB Nikolai Patrushev (currently secretary of the Security Council of Russia), successfully carries out the plan. Each operation in this scheme corresponds to one part of the novel.

At the beginning of the story, “Chosen One” is the deputy of “Plut” (“Tricky”), who was responsible for the luxurious redecoration of Yeltsin’s Kremlin (whose prototype is Pavel Borodin, a chief manager in the Kremlin administration whom Putin worked for in 1998). In the first part of the novel, the “secret debauchee” “Prokurator” (Prosecutor) (Prokhanov, 2002: 75), Iurii Skuratov, General Prosecutor in the first half of 1999, is gathering compromising materials against “Idol” (the old, sick President Yeltsin) in accordance with the instructions of the “Bald Mayor” (Iurii Luzhkov, the Mayor of Moscow), who wants to become president himself. Prokhanov’s fictional protagonist, retired KGB General Belosel’tsev, entices Prosecutor to a special flat, where he is seduced by two prostitutes. The entire episode is videotaped and shown two days later on a major Moscow television channel belonging to the Jewish media magnate Zaretsky (Berezovsky). Prosecutor loses his post, changes take place in the FSB and Interior Ministry, and Chosen One becomes Director of the FSB. This episode corresponds to a real incident that took place at the end of May 1999, when General Prosecutor Skuratov was “caught” in bed with two prostitutes and the entire episode was shown on a Berezovsky-owned TV channel. As a result, Skuratov lost his post and Putin became director of the FSB.

In the second part of the novel, the FSB, with the assistance of Zaretsky and shadowy Chechen agents, provokes a war in Chechnia and Dagestan, thus compromising the “plump-cheeked” young “Premier” (Prime Minister) (Prokhanov, 2002: 172), who constantly prattles about his officers’ honour (Sergei Stepashin, Prime Minister in May-August 1999). He loses his position and Chosen One becomes Prime Minister. This part of the novel is also entirely based on fact: at the beginning of August 1999, after the

Chechen invasion of Dagestan, Prime Minister Stepashin was dismissed and Putin took his place. It has also been alleged that Berezovsky played a role in the preparations for the Chechen invasion.

The third part of Prokhanov's novel concerns the fate of the pro-Western politician "Grammofonchik" ("Gramophone") (Anatolii Sobchak, former Mayor of St Petersburg), who was Chosen One's boss at the beginning of the 1990s. Indeed, Putin was Sobchak's protégé and Deputy Mayor of St Petersburg in 1992-3. Prokhanov relates that KGB agents poison a glass of Camus cognac that Gramophone is drinking, and he dies. Gramophone's death is necessary to "Plan Swahili" to save "Chosen One" from the exposure of incriminating information about him. This is perhaps one part of the novel entirely based on speculation: Sobchak did indeed die in August 1999, but the official cause of death was a heart attack.

Part Four ("Operation Hexogen") is the most sensational part of the novel and the most potentially damaging for Putin's regime. Using a hexogen explosive, the "KGB order" organizes a series of explosions in blocks of Moscow flats in 1999, but Chechen guerrillas are framed for this crime. This provides a pretext for the new prime minister, Chosen One, to lead the "war of revenge" in Dagestan and Chechnia. He is soon regarded as the people's hero, which paves his way to the presidential post. In reality, whoever was responsible for the bombings of 1999, the FSB and Putin undoubtedly used the bomb blasts to start a "patriotic campaign" that increased Putin's prestige, enabling him at the beginning of 2000 to become the acting president of Russia.

The allegations in Prokhanov's novel that the Russian security services were responsible for the 1999 bombings coincide with the accusations made by the exiled Berezovsky (although, on the other hand, Berezovsky himself is portrayed as the most evil oligarch in the novel). Whether or not these allegations are true, Putin and the FSB are clearly very sensitive about them and have tried to prevent them from being disseminated any further in Russia. In March-May 2002, the Russian customs confiscated many videotapes of "The Assassination of Russia," a film produced by Berezovsky (screened in London in March 2002), which depicts the FSB's role in the Moscow and Volgograd bombings, as well as the failed attempt to produce a similar explosion in Riazan in September 1999. In addition, the FSB and Russian Interior Ministry energetically searched for further copies of the film that had been smuggled into the country.

At the end of Prokhanov's novel the FSB gains supreme power and initiates the redistribution of property in its own interests. In particular, the media magnates Zaretsky and Astros, who are depicted as "Russophobic" members of a world-wide Jewish conspiracy, lose their empires (as actually happened to Berezovsky and Gusinsky). The implication is, however, that the position of the Russian people becomes no better under the new repressive regime.

Two commentators writing in the West, Aleksandr Nemets and Thomas Torda, who generally accept Berezovsky's and Prokhanov's version of events, have suggested that "millions of Russians" do indeed trust the facts given in Prokhanov's novel and consider the FSB and Putin the main "heroes" behind the Moscow bombings (Putin himself has been called "Mr. Hexogen").⁵ They also emphasize, with some astonishment, that despite all this information, Putin remained extremely popular in Russia in the early 2000s, when up to 75 per cent of Russians still supported him (although according to some sources based on "closed polls," the level of support was actually much less). With considerable apprehension, they point out that a similar situation existed in Germany in 1936-8, when Hitler, like Putin, was popular both at home and in Western Europe. They also claim that direct struggle against the "Chosen One" ("Mr. Hexogen") and the security services has become almost impossible under Putin's administration, which is controlled by the FSB. In June 2002, for example, the Russian Duma adopted a "law against extremism" which can easily be used not only against convicted Chechen terrorists, but also against any individual or organization hostile to the existing regime.

In mid-May 2002, the Russian General Prosecutor's office announced that it had found no clues connecting the FSB with the explosions in the blocks of flats. This claim was made in a special letter from Deputy General Prosecutor Vasily Kolmogorov (the Kremlin candidate in the Sakha-Yakutia Republic's presidential election in December 2001) to Duma member Sergei Iushenkov, Berezovsky's main representative in Russia. This is hardly surprising, since the General Prosecutor Vladimir Ustinov, his deputy Vasily Kolmogorov, and their associates clearly had no wish to suffer the fate of former General Prosecutor Iurii Skuratov (described so vividly in the

⁵ Aleksandr Nemets and Thomas Torda, "Gospodin Geksogen," *NewsMax.com*, 19 July 2002, www.newsmax.com/archives/articles/2002/7/18/213136.shtml

novel). The failure to make any arrests for these explosions, and the subsequent fate of some of Putin's major opponents, including the shocking murder of the investigative journalist Anna Politkovskaia in October 2006, do indeed suggest either that Putin's regime has much to hide, or that the government is unable to control the FSB and its allies in Chechnia.

Prokhanov's novel was published on the *Zavtra* website and printed in several hundred thousand copies by the intellectual publishing house "Ad Marginem," thus allowing far more Russians access to this text than is usual with Russian literary works outside the genres of "mass literature." Many Russian readers, including those who did not normally choose to read "national-patriotic" literature, were therefore able to familiarize themselves with extremist right-wing views. Liberal intellectuals were particularly shocked that a serious, usually liberal publishing house like "Ad Marginem" had chosen to publish Prokhanov's peculiar mixture of Stalinism, Russian Orthodoxy, and neo-fascism,⁶ and some were shocked by Prokhanov's decision to donate the money he won from the National Bestseller Prize to the campaign fund of the imprisoned National Bolshevik writer Eduard Limonov (which demonstrates a certain solidarity among right-wing intellectuals belonging to different political factions, but united in their hostility to Putin).

Prokhanov's star certainly seems to have risen in the twenty-first century. His enormously long novels, which few Russians used to read, have now become very fashionable, and Prokhanov has been lionized in high society. His earlier novels, which attracted little attention at the time of publication, have been published in revised editions, notably *Poslednii soldat imperii* (*Last Soldier of the Empire*, first published in 1993; revised in 2003), a novel which laments the end of the Soviet empire and the collapse of the Soviet state, displaying extreme anti-Western (especially anti-American) sentiments. Prokhanov supports the State Emergency Committee's attempt to topple Gorbachev, and regards post-Soviet Moscow with its foreign-owned supermarkets and advertising hoardings in English, as a city under occupation. Similarly, his 1999 novel *Krasno-korichnevyyi* (literally *Red-Brown*, but other possible translations are "Communist-Fascist," or

⁶ On the attitudes of liberal intellectuals to Prokhanov's novel and its publishing house, see Sergei Chuprinin, "Posle draki. Urok prikladnoi konspirologii," *Znamia*, 2002, No. 10: 192-7.

“Communist-Nazi”), which presents a graphic depiction of Yeltsin’s attack on the White House in 1993, has also been republished in 2003. Prokhanov suggests that the only hope of combating globalization and the Westernization of post-Soviet Russia is a “red-brown” patriotism based on the sovereignty of the state and a “Russian Empire” that transcends the narrower notion of Russia as an ethnic state “for the Russians” alone. In his later novel *Politolog* (*The Political Scientist*, 2005), his hero Strizhailo issues a chilling threat to the West:

Below, hidden by clouds, Europe was relaxing after the end of the “Cold War,” naively imagining that Russia had ceased for ever to be an empire, and that Russian tanks would now never reach the Elbe and the Oder. Strizhailo gulped his whisky and allowed himself a refined smile at the mistake the sybaritic continent was making (Prokhanov, 2005: 188).

It is a striking sign of the times that Prokhanov, the erstwhile spokesman of the Soviet military whose nationalist and imperialist views became deeply unfashionable during perestroika and the early 1990s, has found in the authoritarian Putin era that Russian politics and society are once again moving in his direction.

Another artistically talented writer with extremist political views is Eduard Limonov, whose first and best novel *Eto ia, Edichka* (It’s Me, Eddie, 1979), a sexually frank exposé of the life of a Russian émigré on welfare in New York, achieved a *succès de scandale* in the West, and became a bestseller when it was eventually published in Russia in 1991.⁷ Whereas Limonov was then seen as a left-wing writer with Trotskyite sympathies, his political career since returning to Russia from France in 1991 has been more associated with the right: he had been an ally of both Zhirinovskiy and Dugin, but broke with both. With Dugin, he had established the National Bolshevik Party in 1994 from which Dugin departed in 1998. Although Limonov’s provocative, sexually explicit writings have always appealed to a disgruntled audience of rebellious youth, his political views have reached a wider audience in the twenty-first century, especially after his prison term in 2001-3 on charges including the unlawful procurement of weapons, terrorism, and the formation of an illegal

⁷ For Limonov’s earlier biography and writings, see Rogachevskii 2003; for more recent developments, see Meier 2008.

armed unit to invade Kazakhstan. Any popularity that Limonov enjoys may be due to the fact that, as is rumoured, he is often prepared to express explicitly what other Russians are only thinking.

His autobiographical *Kniga vody* (*Book of Water*, 2002), written in prison, became a bestseller, and, along with most of Limonov's recent writings, is available in Russian on the Internet. His manifesto *Drugaia Rossiia: Ochertaniia budushchego* (*The Other Russia: Outlines of the Future*, 2003), published on his release from prison, is permeated with ultranationalism, xenophobia, and misogynistic views. He refers to his two passions as "war and women", and expresses a neo-fascist aspiration towards the rebirth of a new state, with "new people", making such extraordinary statements as:

It will be necessary for new people to have children. Many children will be essential for the country to grow rapidly. It will therefore be necessary to permit many types of family: those that will lead to unprecedented multiplication. Polygamy and free communities should be allowed. Women should be permanently pregnant and bearing children (Limonov 2003).

I am not suggesting that many Russian politicians or intellectuals take Limonov's views seriously, but the fact that they are not unique in contemporary Russia is demonstrated by the fact that in 2000, Zhirinovskiy attempted to introduce a law on polygamy into the Duma. It is, moreover, unfortunate that because there is no opportunity for Limonov and his supporters to organize legally, he has joined the opposition movement "Drugaia Rossiia" ("The Other Russia"), along with the genuinely liberal former chess champion Garry Kasparov, and a serious politician, the former Prime Minister Mikhail Kas'ianov. Although Limonov is at least consistent in his opposition to the current Russian government, and has been detained several times during demonstrations in 2008-9, his participation has sometimes been used as a pretext to discredit the whole movement.

“The imperial novel”

The term “*imperskost*” (which should be translated as “imperiality”, or “an imperial mentality” rather than “imperialism”) has become widely used in Russian society and the media since the 1990s, although its meaning varies and is often far from clear. It has been predominantly used as a slogan by the “patriotic opposition” to express their nostalgia for the Soviet Union (Boym 2001; Ivanova 2003), and their hostility to what they perceive as the relentless spread of globalization and Western cultural imperialism. Notions of *imperskost* have also been invoked to counter Yeltsin’s view that not only formerly colonized nations but Russia too had been a victim of the Soviet Empire, and to oppose attempts by post-Soviet leaders to create a new Russian civic consciousness, rather than one based on traditional concepts of national greatness associated with imperial values and the Russian Orthodox Church.

This section of the paper will explore some of the new literature expressing “neo-imperialist” views by two new, younger writers that emerged at the end of the 1990s. Since the collapse of the Soviet Empire,⁸ the literary genre that tends to be used to explore such ideas is the fantasy novel – either the “historical fantasy” presenting an alternative view of Russian or Soviet history, or the fantasy set in the future, whether utopian or dystopian.

One particularly striking example of this genre was Pavel Krusanov’s *Ukus angela* (*The Bite of an Angel*, 1999), which won the prize sponsored by the journal *Oktiabr*.⁹ Krusanov (born 1961) had begun writing during perestroika, but not been noticed at that time, like many of his young contemporaries. By the late 1990s, however, he had managed to adapt to the current literary and political situation by combining fashionable fantastic and esoteric themes with imperialist ambitions, probably under the direct or indirect influence of the right-wing thinkers Aleksandr Sekatsky and Aleksandr Dugin.

⁸ Although Hosking and others have argued that Russia’s nationhood has been associated with empire since Ivan IV’s conquest of Kazan in the 1550s, it is a contested issue whether either “nation-state” or “empire” is an appropriate definition of the multi-ethnic Russian Federation.

⁹ Krusanov’s novel, along with other “imperial novels,” was subsequently published by the Petersburg publishing house “Amfora” (2000).

Bite of an Angel describes an alternative world in which, at the end of the twentieth century, Russia, instead of shrinking to its smallest size for about 200 years, has extended its empire to China and the Balkans, and is waging a world war to annex more territories. The novel depicts the rise to supreme power of the dictator Ivan Nekitaev (whose name literally means “not-Chinese”), who is presented as an Antichrist figure, with demonic powers. Nekitaev stops at nothing in his ruthless pursuit of dictatorial power: he has sex with his sister, throws an inconvenient mistress from an aeroplane, and kills all his closest associates, one by one, in the most brutal manner. At the end of the novel, when he begins losing the war he has started, he unleashes his “Hounds of Hecate” to hasten the Apocalypse.

Bite of an Angel is quite accomplished stylistically and has been compared to “magical realism” and the work of the fashionable Serbian writer Milosz Pavić. However, the most important reason for its popularity was that it plays on the post-imperialist nostalgia of a failed superpower. As the perceptive Russian critic Vsevolod Brodsky has commented,

Bite plays on the subconscious hopes and fears of the post-Soviet reader, oppressed by the transformation of his country from a world superpower to a slightly embarrassing European country with poor municipal services.¹⁰

Not surprisingly, Krusanov’s novel attained wide popularity and considerable praise from Russian nationalist critics (Kniazev, n.d.). What Russian critics have not acknowledged, however – perhaps because it is so common in Russian discourse – is that Krusanov’s novel is also an extremely misogynistic text: women are simply sexual objects and breeding animals in Nekitaev’s new Empire.

It is not clear from the text whether Krusanov supports the merciless Nekitaev or not, although he is obviously fascinated by this powerful leader for whom, in Dostoevsky’s terms, “everything is permissible.” In an interview of 2001, however, Krusanov clarified his views (perhaps to insure against criticism?), claiming that his novel was intended to be interpreted as an “instruction” or warning that empires should be limited: “an Empire should not incarnate the idea of universality, it should have frontiers, and, if not an enemy, then at least a rival on those frontiers. After destroying its

¹⁰ Vsevolod Brodsky, “Letter from Russia,” transl. Keith Gessen, *Context*, No. 9, Online Edition, www.centerforbookculture.org/context/no9/brodsky.htm

final rival, an Empire will destroy itself too.”¹¹ Since, as he points out, no empire has actually gone as far as this in reality, his “artistic experiment” has proved all the more interesting.

Krusanov does, however, acknowledge that he, like the majority of his fellow countrymen, has an “imperial consciousness” because he was born in an empire, “even if not the most attractive in the world.” Nevertheless, he claims to have no desire for the return of an empire of either the Soviet or the tsarist type, which, as he correctly notes, is “currently romanticized” in Russia. He yearns instead for a mystical empire: “an order of the spirit...which longs for some ideal form, longs for the Heavenly Empire, which still only awaits its creator.” At the same time the “bearer of spirit, of course, realizes that the Heavenly Empire, like every transcendental object, is most likely unattainable.” Krusanov admits that he is an “imperialist” (*imperets*) in the mould of the conservative nineteenth-century thinker Konstantin Leont’ev, “because in the first instance I am attracted not by order, power or an ‘iron hand,’ but by the aesthetics of Empire.” However, he does acknowledge that “to a certain extent these things are interrelated.”

Yet although he may not advocate an apocalyptic world war to expand the Russian empire, Krusanov has certainly ventured beyond the “aesthetics of empire” (whatever this means), and shown himself to be a passionate advocate of imperialist political views who, along with his colleagues in the “Ob”edinennoe peterburgskoe mogushchestvo” (“United Petersburg Power”) signed a petition in 2001 deploring the “enormous territorial losses of Russia at the end of the twentieth century.” They urged Putin to “defend the invisible borders” of the Russian Federation, which allegedly exist in the “imperial self-consciousness” of the Russian people, and explicitly named these borders as “Tsargrad, the Bosphorus and the Dardanelles.”¹² “Tsargrad” is the old Slavonic name for Constantinople, the lost city which the Russian Tsars allegedly wished to recapture, but which was no longer used in Russian after this distant goal was abandoned. By reviving this

¹¹ Pavel Krusanov, “Menia privlekaet estetika imperii...,” http://www-lat.fandom.ru/inter/krusanov_1.htm (accessed 10 Aug. 2005).

¹² Published in *Russkii zhurnal, Kuritsyn Weekly*, 13 April 2001, under the title “Rossiia, kotoruyu ne hochetsya teryat’ [sic],” <http://www.russ.ru:8085/krug/news/20010413-pr.html>. Apart from Pavel Krusanov, the other signatories were Vadim Nazarov, Sergei Nosov, Vladimir Rekshan, Aleksandr Sekatsky, and Il’ia Stogov, whose literary and philosophical texts also deserve further research.

archaic term, the “new Petersburg fundamentalists” clearly want to restore the pre-revolutionary imperial consciousness, but it is not clear if they believe this objective should exist only in the mind, or whether these writers actually expect Putin to expand the frontiers of the Russian Federation.

This petition, in turn, was just part of the “Invisible Empire” project which he and his fellow writers grouped round the Petersburg “Amfora” publishing house had announced in April 2001. They initially proclaimed an artistic manifesto entitled “Zaiavlenie dlia publichnogo oglasneniia” (“Statement for Public Proclamation”) and launched a new book series of “public intellectual prose” which has proved to be quite successful. The liberal critic Dmitry Golyenko-Volfson has perceptively summarized the disturbing views of the “Petersburg fundamentalists:”

Russia has of course been reduced from a superpower to an economically broken-down colony of globalized capitalism, and the fundamentalists believe it will have to redeem itself through a new messianic ideal, balancing between mystical fascism and Orthodox sanctity.¹³

Another influential writer of nationalist and imperialist novels who has become much more prominent in the twenty-first century is the outspoken and provocative Moscow-based poet, critic and television presenter Dmitrii Bykov (born 1967), whose fiction falls into the category of “historical fantasies” that envisage an alternative past for the Soviet empire.

Bykov’s first novel *Opravdanie* (which can be translated as *Justification*, or *The Acquittal*, 2001)¹⁴ presents a fantastic version of the motives for Stalin’s purges, showing that new writers of the younger generation, particularly those with right-wing sympathies, were by the twenty-first century prepared to adopt a completely new (and to many, shocking) approach to sensitive historical topics which for older generations were part of horrific lived experience. Bykov’s protagonist, the young historian Slava Rogov, is obsessed by the fate of his grandfather Ivan Skaldina, a brilliant professor at the Timiriazev Agricultural Academy who was arrested in 1938 and had apparently disappeared in Stalin’s camps, although his mother thinks she heard his voice on the phone many years later. Rogov seeks to

¹³ Dmitry Golyenko-Volfson, “Letters from Russia,” *Context*, Online edition, No. 14.

¹⁴ Dmitrii Bykov, “Opravdanie: Roman,” *Novyi mir*, 2001, Nos 3, 4; republished in book form by Vagrius (2005).

discover the meaning of Stalin's repressions: in particular, he wonders why it was necessary to destroy the most talented military men on the eve of an inevitable war, and to kill the country's best scientists and writers. He learns from his neighbour Kreto, an elderly ex-prisoner, the startling information that Stalin's purges and camps acted as a "great filter:" those who behaved most bravely under torture, giving no false testimony either against themselves or others, were not shot but sent to special Siberian settlements where they were forged into a new Soviet elite, or "a golden company" (Bykov, 2005: 63). It was these strong personalities who were called upon to defend the Fatherland in its moments of crisis, such as the Battles of Moscow and Stalingrad. In the post-war period some of the survivors return, including the great Jewish writer Isaac Babel (who was actually shot in 1940).

To Kreto, the use of mass terror to discover a mere handful of worthy individuals seems to justify Stalin's policy:

How was he [Stalin] to test the population? Hitler was torturing his own people everywhere in Germany, the strongest communists were being broken, war was inevitable – how can you tell who will be able to withstand that machine? And so he selected – cruelly, of course, but, if you think about it, his method wasn't the worst. No, not the worst.

Kreto also argues that Stalin believed that the majority of Soviet people were so "rotten" that they deserved no better fate than the camps, and advances a Nietzschean explanation of Stalin's policy: "He understood that it was impossible to build a super-state with a normal people, with the previous specialists. A super-state must be built by supermen" (Bykov, 2005: 65-6).

Although Rogov does not initially take this hypothesis seriously, he eventually comes to feel that there is a "rational core" to it. Putting himself in the position of Stalin's torturers, he conjectures:

When a marshal broke before their eyes, a recent arbiter of fates was crawling over the cement floor, or a favourite party feuilletonist betrayed his wife and children – even the most obtuse interrogator could not fail to experience, besides the usual plebeian vindictiveness, satisfaction of a higher order – the fulfilment of some kind of higher justice. If such rotten people had taught them all how to live or had stood at the head of the army – they had got their just deserts!

It was this “nonsensical dialogue” that particularly incensed liberal critics, especially the labelling of millions of completely innocent victims of Stalinism as “rotten people” (“*gnil*”, “*gnilye*”).¹⁵ It is difficult to decide whether this, and other similar statements, should be interpreted as Bykov’s attempt to provide an accurate depiction of the psychology of Stalin’s torturers (a fashionable theme in the late and post-Soviet periods), or as a deliberate attempt to be provocative and offensive to his elders, particularly liberal intellectuals of the 1960s generation.

At the end of the novel Bykov’s protagonist Rogov is himself subjected to violence (albeit only in a fantastic manner), and he comes to the conclusion that:

The meaning of life was not the destruction of other people, not the seizure of other people’s land, not the pitiful, essentially animal battle for existence – it was to inflict and survive pain, pointless and useless, now demeaning, now elevating the soul. Pain was regarded as of paramount importance – not the dull pain of a beaten animal, but the lofty metaphysics of punishment, in the face of which all are equal; the pain of exquisite martyrdom, pain as catharsis, pain as relief! (Bykov, 2005: 248).

Although we have to remember that Rogov is finally revealed to be mentally ill, this sadomasochistic justification of pain in the service of the Stalinist empire offers a challenge to all those who advance a liberal, humanistic interpretation of Stalin’s crimes. It also provides a new permutation on the idea of resistance to Stalin, and on the age-old Russian propensity to praise suffering and martyrdom. Rogov constantly reflects on the question of “the mechanisms of selection in a time of repression,” basing his views on his own experience of bullying in the army. He develops a whole theory about the use of force:

Chance and unpredictable motives began to appear to him as the main sign of Divine will. It was impossible to respect will power directed by ordinary human rules...There is only force – and this force is strong up to the point when its motive is clear and its actions are unpredictable (Bykov, 2005: 59-60).

¹⁵ Nikolai Rabotnov, “Iosif Vissarionovich meniaet professiiu. Metamorfozy podkhoda k izobrazheniiu gosudarstvennogo nasiliia v russkoi literature,” *Znamia*, 2002, No. 8: 196-210.

He has similar respect for an empire based on force:

This was why the empire was an empire – with all its greatness, with its victory over nature...because it abolished good and evil, dividing everyone into consistent executioners and consistent victims, and this was its incomparable, nostalgically lovable integrity.(Bykov, 2005: 45).

Bykov's own views were expressed in an illuminating interview with Igor' Shevelev in 2001, when he was asked if his novel intended to expose or eulogize the "imperial myth:"

Yes, unfortunately, in the process of writing it became clear that imperial structures were more convincing than their opposite. The Stalinist empire is presented in the novel as much more seductive than contemporary life, from which the main hero seeks to escape. Perhaps that's a good thing. The critic Ageev is right: Bykov is above all attracted by force. I'm afraid that's true....The fact is that in itself martyrdom is aesthetically more attractive than any purpose for which it is supposedly undergone....The idea of *Justification*: that repressions had the aim of forming a new type of person – does not seem so very subversive to me. And even productive, from a literary point of view.¹⁶

Bykov's bold and sensational subject matter caused heated debate in Russian intellectual circles. To some critics and readers who had lived through the Stalin era, the very decision to treat this sensitive historical topic in such a fantastic and provocative manner was in extremely poor taste, to say the least. Some found the depiction of Babel as "an obsequious toady to Stalin" particularly repellent.¹⁷ Others complained about the discussion of this issue in flat, journalistic language rather than with the stylistic flair of a "new Platonov."¹⁸ Others, however, defended the author's right to handle this subject in any way he chose. Elena Shubina, an editor for Vagrius, the publishing house which produced Bykov's novel, argued that she was interested in seeing how the new "generation of thirty-year-

¹⁶ Igor' Shevelev, "Bol'shaia proverka. Dmitrii Bykovu stalinskoe vremia kazhetsia soblaznitel'nee nashego," *Vremia MN*, 4 April 2001: 7.

¹⁷ Stanislav Rassadin, "Samyi ne chitaiushchii," *Novaia gazeta*, No. 81, 5 Nov. 2001.

¹⁸ Valerii Shubinskii, "V epokhu pozdnei bronzy," *Novoe literaturnoe obozrenie*, 2001. No. 51.

olds” would approach the theme of Stalin’s terror, and simply stated: “I like the way Dima writes.”¹⁹

Despite serious criticism from liberals and anti-Stalinists, Bykov’s novel received recognition from both critics and readers by winning the Vagrius publishing house’s “First Novel” prize, as well as being shortlisted for both the “National Bestseller prize” and the Strugatsky brothers’ prize for fantasy literature. *Opravdanie* represents a particularly graphic expression of the changing climate of opinion in contemporary Russia, with its display of imperial nostalgia and love of power. This interpretation is borne out by the frank comments Bykov made in the interview with Shevelev when he admitted that he had written the novel to struggle against his own “imperial complex:” “This is not necessarily a Soviet imperial complex, but some general totalitarianism of tastes which is very characteristic of me.” He also acknowledges his sympathy for the Nietzschean concept of the Superman:

A human being is the effort of being a human being...a human being is what needs to be overcome...All of us who are interesting to one another are solely concerned with squeezing the human being out of ourselves, our biological cowardice and limited nature.

In the conclusion of the novel, it is revealed that Rogov was mentally ill, and that the hypothesis about the formation of the Stalinist elite was nothing but a product of his diseased brain; he finally dies in a Siberian bog because he has succumbed to the temptation of evil. However, this sudden transformation is far less convincing than the praise of force – and even of violence and torture – in the body of the novel. It is difficult to escape the conclusion that Bykov simply tacked on the ending to make it more likely to achieve publication and not to inflict too great a shock on liberal, humanist opinion.

Bykov’s *Justification* demonstrates the tendency of certain writers of the younger generation who did not experience the Stalin era to attempt not merely to explain Stalinism, but to justify it, expressing regret for the end of the Soviet empire, and adopting a neo-fascist admiration for naked force and strong personalities. Bykov’s novel, although perhaps partly influenced by Solzhenitsyn, who in *The Gulag Archipelago* had expressed admiration

¹⁹ Elena Shubina, “Ostrov v knizhnom more,” *Novye vremena*, No. 31, 22 Aug.-4 Sept. 2005.

for those brave few who had stood up to their Stalinist interrogators, and by other works of the late 1980s that had emphasized resistance to the Stalinist regime, affords a total contradiction to the testimony of GULag survivors themselves and to the liberal, humanist views of “people of the 1960s generation” whose views were predominant during glasnost (Marsh 1996).

Was Bykov simply looking for a new, shocking approach to the subject of Stalinism; or is he, like other writers and intellectuals of his generation, prey to the temptation of neo-fascism as a response to the end of empire? It could, of course, be argued that it is Bykov’s protagonist Rogov, not the author himself, who expresses sympathy for such views, but Rogov is clearly intended to be the author’s *alter ego*, as his name suggests: Rogov comes from “rog” (a horn) while Bykov is derived from the word “byk” (a bull). Bykov, as he has admitted in interviews, clearly despises weakness, and he appears to sympathize with those interrogators who regarded those who were broken and begged for mercy as *gnil’* (“rotten people”). He fails to point out that the millions denigrated by such labels were totally innocent people, appearing to regard the infliction of pain in the service of the state as justified, and suggesting that terror may lead to the acquisition of enlightenment. His novel presents a complete contrast to the restrained depiction of the prison camp in Solzhenitsyn’s *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich*, or to the justified anger in works by former prisoners, such as Varlam Shalamov’s *Kolyma Tales*, and the many memoirs by camp survivors who have told the truth about their own sufferings in the GULag.

It is possible that Bykov’s novel would have been acceptable to some critics in a collection of works of science fiction and fantasy, but they found it difficult to accept its publication in such a respected “thick journal” as *Novyi mir* – and, subsequently, in the prestigious publishing house “Vagrius.” Bykov’s novel cannot be regarded as totally original, since it follows the genre of “alternative history” in the vein of magical realism established by Vladimir Sharov in the 1990s, and the depiction of a resurrected Babel is reminiscent of the clones of writers portrayed in Sorokin’s *Goluboe salo* (Blue Lard, 1999). However, Bykov’s *Opravdanie* presents a significant, though highly disturbing, departure from earlier interpretations of Stalinism in both Russian and Western literature.

Bykov does, of course, have a perfect right to write such “quasi-historical” novels, but his new and provocative approach to Stalinism clearly reflects the challenging right-wing views that were becoming more

prevalent in mainstream publications in the twenty-first century. Although older, more liberal writers and critics were still prepared to counter such ultranationalist views, arguing that there can be no justification – even a fantastic one – for Stalin’s crimes, one wonders whether future generations of Russians will even come into contact with such anti-Stalinist views now that Solzhenitsyn has died and other camp survivors of his generation are growing old.

Another interesting “imperial novel” set in an earlier historical period is Bykov’s second novel *Orfografiia* (*Orthography*, first published in 2003), which the author subtitled an “opera in three acts.” In the “Afterword” to the novel he also explains that he wanted “to revive the traditions of the native epic” in Russian literature (Bykov 2004: 686).²⁰ His novel, moreover, fits into the genre of the *roman à clef*, since it includes both real historical characters under their own names, such as Gorky, and others with pseudonyms whose prototypes are easily recognizable, such as the writers Maiakovsky (Korabel’nikov), Khlebnikov (Melnikov) and Khodasevich (who is called Kazarin, the name of the egoist and hypocrite in Lermontov’s play “Masquerade”). While some sympathetic critics have even called *Orthography* “Russia’s answer to *The Magic Mountain*,” or “the nearest thing to a great post-Soviet novel,” others have strongly objected to its central theme.

Bykov’s novel starts from a real event – the Bolsheviks’ orthographic reform of 1918 – but imagines that instead of reform, they have the revolutionary notion of abolishing Russian orthography altogether, since they regard the old Russian spelling as one aspect of the tsarist regime’s world-view which hinders the understanding of the uneducated peasantry and working class. The novel relates how in 1918 a number of linguists and writers are sent by Commissar Charnolusky (an obvious reference to Lunacharsky, the Commissar for Education and Enlightenment) to a commune on Elagin Island in Petrograd with the assignment of reinventing the Russian alphabet. At the same time, however, another group of young avant-garde writers forms its own, rival commune. The protagonist of the novel, a budding newspaper reporter writing under the pseudonym Yat’ (the name of a pre-revolutionary letter that was eliminated by the reform and replaced by “e”), is intended to symbolize the old intelligentsia. Yat’ is torn

²⁰ References in the text are to a later edition published in 2004.

between the two camps, finding many different arguments persuasive but feeling unable to support any of them whole-heartedly. He is eventually dismissed from his job when his newspaper is closed down for being “counter-revolutionary.” Bykov suggests that Yat’ is cast off from society like the letters of the old alphabet, yet oppressed by the new order which seizes his home to accommodate proletarian families. Since he and his fellow intellectuals can do nothing but disrupt the development of the new regime, he finally feels obliged to leave his beloved Crimea and emigrate from the USSR. The most interesting and effective aspects of the novel are those devoted to debates between the intellectuals of the immediate post-revolutionary period, and the evocation of Yat’s exile from his homeland.

Bykov claims in his “Afterword” that the only invented element in the novel is the initial plotline – the reinvention of Russian orthography. Yet although the post-revolutionary literary milieu is skilfully evoked, Bykov’s aim in writing *Orfografiia* was more ambitious than simply the realistic depiction of a specific historical period: as the liberal critic Lev Danilkin suggested, it was motivated by “a tremendous will to transform not only the literary but primarily the social landscape.”²¹ The novel is a metaphor for revolution, for political and cultural upheaval, which raises the fundamental questions: where did the Russian state go wrong in the twentieth century? What was the role of the Russian intelligentsia in this process? What caused the historical degradation of the Russian empire? The novel suggests that many members of the post-revolutionary intelligentsia felt that the new regime’s methods of achieving its goals were too crude, but the different factions were unable to work together for the good of their country, wasting their time instead in furious disputes with each other.

The author draws parallels between the immediate post-revolutionary period, which witnessed the closure of the liberal newspaper *Rech’* in 1917 and Gorky’s Left Socialist Revolutionary paper *Novaia zhizn’* in 1918, and the turmoil of the Putin era, notably the conflict surrounding the closure of the NTV television station in 2001 which dealt a serious blow to freedom of speech and the hopes of the liberal intelligentsia. Bykov’s depiction of the early Soviet intellectuals’ inability to live under one roof and their involvement in constant conflicts and schisms also reflects the bitter and

²¹ See the extracts from Lev Danilkin, “O knige “Orfografiia” Dmitriia Bykova,” published in *Afisha*, March 2003, http://www.vagrius.ru/press/bykov_af.shtml

continuing conflict between the “democrats” and “patriots” in post-Soviet Russia. The contemporary parallels are enhanced because, according to Russian commentators, Yat’s appearance is reminiscent of that of the well-known film critic Andrei Shemiakin, while his character resembles that of Viktor Shenderovich (director of “Kukly” (“Dolls”), the Russian version of the satirical television series “Spitting Image,” which aroused the hostility of both Yeltsin and Putin and was taken off the air in 2002.²²

Bykov is not sympathetic to the liberal intellectuals of either period, suggesting that they fuss and panic impotently, while the power of the post-revolutionary state aims to simplify the lives of ordinary people. In his “Afterword,” Bykov clarifies the resemblance between the two revolutionary periods:

No one who has lived in Russia in the 1990s can fail to know the Russian revolution: there are certain things that are typologically inherent in all pre- and post-revolutionary periods. On the eve of the coup you feel ecstasy and tension, a creative upsurge and an incomparable sense of belonging to the destiny of the world; after the coup comes the turn of disillusionment and boredom.

Every revolution, in Bykov’s view, also leads to a schism among the intelligentsia between those prepared to cooperate with the new regime and those who rebel against it:

A part of the unhappy class, piously believing in the need for change, or dreaming of running ahead of the steam engine, rushes to collaborate with the hegemony; the other takes up conservative and defensive positions, has a sceptical attitude to the prospect of revolutionary transformations and as a result, always turns out to be right (Bykov, 2004: 684).

Here Bykov is clearly articulating his own, conservative critique of the “new Russian revolution” of 1991.

In an interview with Vladimir Itkin, Bykov reiterated his sympathy for the stability of the Russian and Soviet empires and his hostility toward revolutions. He argued in his usual idiosyncratic and provocative manner that while no direct analogy can be drawn between the two periods, there are certain major similarities between the years 1917-18 and the period after

²² “Pod iat’. Roman Dmitriia Bykova kak entsiklopediia svetskoi zhizni,” *NG Subbota*, 11 April 2003.

1985, the year of the accession of Gorbachev, whom he condemns for having destroyed the Soviet empire:

In the first place, we are living after the usual simplification...in 1917 and 1985 underground forces of a similarly dark nature spilled out. These were forces of simplification, primitive forces, and the rejection of self-discipline. In this sense the consequences were the same: the collapse of everything complex, subtle and intelligent, all the reality of a “secondary order” (that is, non-pragmatic, not possessing a crude material nature). Secondly, in contemporary Russia there is no political force that it would not be shameful to join and which it would not be shameful to sympathize with. All are equally bad. As in the conflict between America and Iraq.

In Bykov’s opinion, the Russian Revolution’s aim was to take life back to first principles, reducing the range and diversity of the old, sophisticated tsarist era by proclamations aspiring to simplify everything: literature, morality, orthography, everyday life, and food rations. He suggests that simplification then led to the destruction first of “unnecessary” letters like *yat*, then of culture in general, and eventually, of human beings too. However, in 1918 (and by implication, in 1985 and 1991), few realized how far this process of destruction would lead. He goes on to explain: “it is not for nothing that every revolution begins by simplifying the orthography and ends by removing the taboo on bloodletting.”²³

Conclusion

Although this paper has concentrated on “serious” literature, or, at least, literature that possesses some artistic pretensions, I could also have used many examples of “popular literature” to illustrate the resurgence of nationalist and neo-imperialist ideas in contemporary Russian society, especially hard-boiled thrillers, popular historical novels, and the new genre of “Slavonic fantasy” (Lovell and Menzel, 2005; Borenstein, 2007). The

²³ Dmitrii Bykov, interview with Vladimir Itkin, *Knizhnaia vitrina*, from the website “NaStoiashchaia Literatura – Zhenskii Rod,” <http://www.litwomen.ru>

expression of Russian nationalism is even more evident in film and television programmes, which require government funding (Condee 2009a; 2009b; Liderman 2007); while racism, anti-Semitism and xenophobia reach more extreme proportions in literary criticism (Ivanova 2007), and media discourse, particularly Prokhanov's newspaper *Zavtra*.

This paper has focused on some of the more extreme manifestations of Russian nationalism in recent literature, but, of course, a range of conservative or patriotic views has been expressed in contemporary Russian fiction. Many literary texts published in the post-Soviet period convey a rather more moderate and widely acceptable form of Russian patriotism based on nostalgia for the lost tsarist state and empire, notably the popular "retro-detective" series by Boris Akunin set at the end of the nineteenth century, which feature the gentleman detective Erast Fandorin and the nun Pelageia. On the whole, women writers are not as openly nationalistic or racist as some male authors, but one counter-example is the controversial Elena Chudinova, with her anti-Islamic dystopia *Mechet' parizhskoi bogomateri. 2048 god* (*The Mosque of Notre Dame de Paris, 2048*, 2005).²⁴

Although the "*imperskii roman*" and "new political novel" that emerged in the twenty-first century cannot exactly be seen as a new literature of "social command" similar to Soviet socialist realism, the ideas of right-wing writers about the desirability of a great Russian state certainly reflect the changing political climate of the early twenty-first century. Such texts have helped to create and uphold the values of *russtkost'* ("Russianness") and *gosudarstvennost'* ("state power") that have underpinned the policies of Putin and the Putin-Medvedev diarchy since 2000.

If, in the early 1990s, some of the liberal cultural elite had advocated a postmodernist literature largely divorced from any historical and political context, and the only writers of political novels were such long-standing mavericks as the neo-Stalinist and extreme nationalist Aleksandr Prokhanov and the National Bolshevik leader Eduard Limonov, the late 1990s witnessed the emergence of a number of younger writers of "imperial novels" such as Bykov and Krusanov, who attracted a wide readership and began to win literary prizes. In the twenty-first century too, new works by Putin's right-wing critics Prokhanov and Limonov have attracted more

²⁴ For further discussion, see my forthcoming article "The Concepts of Gender, Citizenship, and Empire and their Reflection in Post-Soviet Literature."

attention from readers and critics than they did in the Yeltsin period, partly because of the apocalyptic atmosphere created by the “war on terror” in both West and East, but also, undoubtedly, because the Russian press and electronic media have been largely under state control.

Do we need to take such literary works seriously? Are some Russian writers simply using right-wing ideas to exert a sensational impact on their readers, gain publicity, and sell more books? Although the love of sensationalism and commercial success have undoubtedly played a part in the creation and reception of their texts, some of these writers also harbour serious right-wing political ambitions and a desire to influence government policy (this is particularly obvious in the cases of Prokhanov and Limonov, but also in the manifesto of the “new Petersburg fundamentalists”). The debate over Prokhanov’s *Mr Hexogen* demonstrates that in the twenty-first century literature still had the power to provoke significant political discussion and controversy in Russia.

How influential have right-wing texts been? Although it is debatable whether extreme right-wing literature has exerted a major impact on public opinion or the policies of the political leaders, it has certainly reflected the changing political climate of the late 1990s and early 2000s that led to the dominance of Putin and his Party “Edinaia Rossiia” (United Russia). Although I am not suggesting that literary texts (or indeed any cultural forms) have the power to shape or change government policy, I would argue that they have at least contributed to the new political environment that has made ultranationalist, racist, xenophobic, neo-imperialist, sexist and homophobic views more “mainstream” in twenty-first century Russia.

Nevertheless, I also agree with Walter Laqueur (2006: 501) that the power and popularity of the current authoritarian regime in Russia may in some ways “make the rise of fascism more difficult,” curbing the more extreme manifestations of “national-patriotic” sentiment. Although, unlike the electronic media, political literature by ultranationalist writers has not been subjected to censorship, perhaps in order to provide a safety-valve for critics to the right of Putin and his party, the government has sometimes moved to curb members of the New Right, particularly Limonov, when his actions and those of his militant supporters (known as the “Natsboly”) have become too radical even for them to permit. Ultra-nationalist ideas, however, have been more than a “paper tiger” in post-Soviet Russia. Prokhanov, whose newspaper *Zavtra* has a circulation of 100,000, and who

has been called “the leader of the patriotic opposition”, has certainly influenced the rhetoric of his friend, the Communist leader Gennadii Ziuganov.²⁵ Towards the end of the twentieth century, ultranationalist thinkers such as Dugin have been prepared to moderate the public expression of their views in order to gain greater acceptance from the Putin administration. Dugin has now reinvented himself as a centrist, a Putin supporter, and even an “anti-fascist” (Umland 2008), and has become Putin’s unofficial adviser on youth policy.

The extremist political ideas and esoteric notions associated with Dugin’s earlier neo-fascist writings that find reflection in Prokhanov’s novels of the post-Soviet period have become disturbingly acceptable in twenty-first century Russia. It could be argued that Laqueur’s (2006) speculation that the ultranationalist forces existing on the fringes of Russia’s patriotic movement might one day persuade the political leaders that a more radical and aggressive approach at home and abroad might become necessary has already, to some extent, come true. Putin’s supporters have shown a growing willingness to co-opt the imagery and rhetoric of the “patriotic opposition,” including some of the themes of Prokhanov and Dugin, and some recent statements on Georgia by Putin and Medvedev are not dissimilar to, if somewhat less extreme than, imperialist declarations by Prokhanov and Limonov.²⁶

I am not suggesting that “neo-fascism” will inevitably become the dominant ideology in Russia, but the difference between the current administration’s “authoritarian nationalism” and “neo-fascism” is only a question of degree. Literature and political writings by right-wing authors are helping to promote such ideas in the early twenty-first century.

²⁵ Gennadii Ziuganov, “Eshche raz o partiinoi literature,” explicitly praised Prokhanov’s novel *Kreiserova sonata* (2003) on the Communist Party website, KPRF.ru, 250/2004, and spoke of the need for a close link between art and politics. Prokhanov has also reputedly had close links with Aleksandr Barkashov, the former leader of the neo-fascist party Russian National Unity, and the anti-Semitic General Makashov.

²⁶ Umland (2008) has pointed out that in 2008, Dugin stated in a radio interview that Georgia’s activities in South Ossetia amounted to “genocide,” whereupon Putin repeated the same term on the same day.

Bibliography and suggestions for further reading

- Billington, James P., 2004. *Russia in Search of Itself*. Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Borenstein, Eliot, 2007. *Overkill: Sex and Violence in Contemporary Russian Popular Culture*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.
- Boym, Svetlana, 2001. *The Future of Nostalgia*. New York: Basic Books.
- Brandenberger, David, 2002. *National Bolshevism: Stalinist Mass Culture and the Formation of Modern Russian National Identity, 1931-1956*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Bykov, Dmitrii, 2004. *Orfografiia: opera v trekh deistviakh*. Moscow: Vagrius, 2004.
- _____, 2005. *Opravdanie*. Moscow: Vagrius.
- Condee, Nancy, 2009a. *Imperial Trace. Recent Russian Cinema*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- _____, 2009b. "Vicarious catastrophe: The third empire watches *Gibel' imperii*." In Birgit Beumers, Stephen Hutchings, and Natalia Rulyova, eds. *The Post-Soviet Russian Media: Power, Change and Conflicting Messages*. London: Routledge: 178-85.
- Dugin, Aleksandr, 1992. *Konspirologiia*. Moscow: Arktogeia.
- _____, 2006. "Fascism – borderless and red," transl. Andreas Umland. In Roger Griffin, Werner Loh and Andreas Umland (eds), *Fascism Past and Present, West and East. An International Debate on Concepts and Cases in the Comparative Study of the Extreme Right*. Stuttgart: ibidem-Verlag: 505-10.
- Dunlop, John P., 1993. *The Rise of Russia and the Fall of the Soviet Empire*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Griffin, Roger, Werner Loh and Andreas Umland, eds. 2006. *Fascism Past and Present, West and East. An International Debate on Concepts and Cases in the Comparative Study of the Extreme Right*. Stuttgart: ibidem-Verlag.
- Griffiths, Edmund, 2007. "Aleksandr Prokhanov and post-Soviet esotericism." Unpublished D.Phil. Thesis, University of Oxford.

- Hanley, Seán, 2008. *The New Right in the New Europe. Czech transformation and right-wing politics, 1989-2006*. London and New York: Routledge.
- Hosking, Geoffrey, 1998. *Russia: People and Empire, 1552-1917*. London: Fontana.
- _____, 2001. *Russia and the Russians: From Earliest Times to 2001*. London: Penguin.
- Ivanova, Natal'ia, 2003. *Nostal'iashchee: sobranie nabliudenii*. Moscow: Raduga.
- _____, 2007. "Osobennosti nationalisticheskogo diskursa v sovremennoi literaturnoi kritike." In Marlen Lariuel', ed. *Sovremennye interpretatsii russkogo natsionalizma*. Stuttgart: ibidem: 274-88.
- Kniazhev, Sergei, n.d. "Toska po rodine", http://opushka.spb.ru/text/knyazhev_txtl.shtm
- Knox, Zoe, 2005. *Russian Society and the Orthodox Church. Religion in Russia after communism*. London and New York: RoutledgeCurzon.
- Krusanov, Pavel, 2000. *Ukus angela*. St Petersburg: Amfora.
- Laqueur, Walter, 1994. *Black Hundred: The Rise of the Extreme Right in Russia*. New York: HarperPerennial.
- _____, 2006. "Afterword." In Roger Griffin, Werner Loh and Andreas Umland, eds, *Fascism Past and Present, West and East*, 501-3.
- Lariuel', Marlen [Marlène Laruelle], comp., 2007a. *Russkii natsionalizm v politicheskom prostranstve (issledovaniia po natsionalizmu v Rossii)*. Moscow: Franko-Rossiiskii tsentr gumanitarnykh i obshchestvennykh nauk.
- _____, ed., 2007b. *Sovremennye interpretatsii russkogo natsionalizma*. Stuttgart: ibidem.
- Liderman, Iuliia, 2007. "Kurs na patriotizm i otvet rossiiskogo kinematografa v 2000-e gody. Novye biudzhety, novye zhanry, novye fil'my o voine." In Marlen Lariuel', ed. *Sovremennye interpretatsii russkogo nationalizma*. Stuttgart: ibidem, 289-317.
- Limonov, Eduard. 2003. *Drugaia Rossiia. Ochertaniia budushchego*. Moscow: Ul'tra Kul'tura. Available on http://nbp-info.ru/new/lib/lib_anotherus/01.html
- Lovell, Stephen, and Birgit Menzel, eds., 2005. *Reading for Entertainment in Contemporary Russia: Post-Soviet Popular Literature in Historical Perspective*. Munich: Sagner.

- Marsh, Rosalind, 1986. *Soviet Fiction since Stalin: Science, Politics and Literature*. London and Sydney: Croom Helm.
- _____, 1995. *History and Literature in Contemporary Russia*. St Antony's/Macmillan Series. London: Macmillan.
- _____, 2007. *History, Literature and Identity in Post-Soviet Russia, 1991-2006*. Oxford, Bern, Frankfurt: Peter Lang.
- Meier, Andrew, 2008. "Putin's Pariah," *New York Times Magazine*, 2 March.
- Parland, Thomas, 1993. *The Rejection in Russia of Totalitarian Socialism and Liberal Democracy. A Study of the Russian New Right*. Helsinki: Societas Scientiarum Fennica.
- Parthé, Kathleen F., 1996. "The Empire Strikes Back: How Right-Wing Russian Nationalists Tried to Recapture Russian Literature," *Nationalities Papers*, Vol.24: 601-24
- _____, 2004. *Russia's Dangerous Texts: Politics Between the Lines*. New Haven and London: Yale University Press.
- Prokhanov, Aleksandr, 1993. *Poslednii soldat imperii: Kremlevskii apokalipsis*. Moscow: Kerchet; Sashko; revised edition, Moscow: Ad marginem, 2003.
- _____, 2002. *Gospodin Geksogen: roman*. Moscow: Ad marginem.
- _____, 2003. *Krasno-korichnevyi*. St Petersburg: Amfora.
- _____, 2005. *Politolog*. Ekaterinburg: Ul'tra Kul'tura.
- Rancour-Laferriere, Daniel, 2001. *Russian Nationalism from an Interdisciplinary Perspective: Imagining Russia*. Lewiston, NY: Mellen.
- Rogachevskii, Andrei, 2003. *A Biographical-Critical Study of Russian Writer Eduard Limonov*. Lewiston, NY: Mellen.
- Scanlan, James P., ed., 1994. *Russian Thought After Communism: The Recovery of a Philosophical Heritage*. Armonk, NY: M.E.Sharpe.
- Shenfield, Stephen D., 2001. *Russian Fascism: Traditions, Tendencies, Movements*. Armonk, NY: M.E.Sharpe.
- Umland, Andreas, 2008. "Who is Alexander Dugin?," <http://www.opendemocracy.net>, 26 September.